

# **COLUMBIA RIVER REGIONAL FORUM**

## **TECHNICAL MANAGEMENT TEAM**

December 17, 2003

### **FACILITATOR'S SUMMARY NOTES ON FUTURE ACTIONS**

Facilitator: Donna Silverberg

The following notes are a summary of issues that are intended to point out future actions or issues that may need further discussion at upcoming meetings. These notes are not intended to be the "record" of the meeting, only a reminder for TMT members.

#### **Chum Update:**

Ron Boyce, Oregon, reported that the cumulative observed live chum this year at Ives Island reflected 25% of the totals observed last year. Currently, live chum and chinook are on the decline. The cumulative total population estimate will be made available at a later date. The Bonneville operation as of Friday Dec. 12<sup>th</sup> was a tailwater elevation range of 11.6-11.9', and yesterday (Dec. 16<sup>th</sup>) went to an 11.8-12.1' range. Dave Wills, USFWS, reported that no objection to this operation was raised by participants that attended yesterday's FPAC meeting. The COE raised concerns about maintaining incubation flows through April and meeting Grand Coulee demands in the spring. The COE's concern was noted and the TMT will monitor operations over the next two weeks.

#### **Snake River Issues:**

*Zero Flow in Snake River:* Cathy Hlebechuk, COE, shared percentages of how often zero flow was used in 2000, 2001 and 2002, using a 24-hour period and 6-hour period. It was noted that, since Dec. 4<sup>th</sup> of this year, zero flow has been used as much as possible within the agreed to 6-hour period. Scott Bettin, BPA, said that this is a useful tool for cost-effective operations. During yesterday's FPAC discussion, concerns were raised that the implementation of zero flow thus far does not represent 'limited use' as a criteria agreed to at the last TMT meeting and part of the Water Control Manual. Also, questions remain for the salmon managers about the "few if any" language in the agreement. It would be useful for the COE, salmon managers and others to look at the agreement and clarify these issues. There is still uncertainty about the impacts to juveniles downstream and adult steelhead migrating upstream. FPAC continues to sift through the available data. No conclusions have yet been made. Greg Haller, Nez Perce, noted that a delay to adult steelhead passage could have an economic impact on the region and asked that the operation not continue until the group is confident that only 'few if any' fish are passing.

**ACTION:** Rudd Turner, COE, will inquire about what data is available relative to adult passage numbers, when the information from this year will be available, and what the possibilities are of extending the video monitoring beyond Dec. 15<sup>th</sup>. Rudd will send this information out to TMT members via email in the next day or two.

#### **Spring Creek Update:**

Dave Wills, USFWS, reported that discussions between the COE, NOAA and USFWS are moving forward on Spring Creek operations for March 2004. Any decisions will be shared with TMT as they are made.

### **Water Management Plan Fall/Winter Update:**

Scott Boyd reported that no additional comments have been made on the fall/winter update. Comments are always welcome, and the goal is to finalize the plan as soon as possible.

### **Operations Update:**

SOR 2003-3, a Libby operation request put forth by the salmon managers, is being implemented. Libby is ramping down, from the current 15 kcfs to 10 kcfs at midnight on Friday, Dec. 19<sup>th</sup>, in order to draft Libby to 2411' by the end of December. The SOR requests steady flows through Jan. 30<sup>th</sup>, recognizing flood control constraints. Albeni Falls is at 2051-2051.5' and releasing 15 kcfs. Dworshak is at 1517.6' and releasing minimum flows. Libby is currently at elevation 2417.6', Grand Coulee is at 1286', and Hungry Horse is at 3527.8'.

### **Libby End of December Variable Draft Limit:**

Cathy Hlebechuk reported that the COE completed a model analysis of the possibility of a variable draft limit at Libby, which is in final draft and available to anyone interested. The COE did not implement the variable limit because of the high December forecast (111% vs. the 85% acceptable forecast).

### **Next Meeting, January 7<sup>th</sup>, 9-noon:**

#### **Agenda Items:**

- Chum Update
- Snake River Issues (Zero Flow, Spring Spill Trigger)
- Spring Creek Update
- WMP Fall/Winter Review
- Operations Update
- Early Bird Water Forecast – RFC

### ***1. Greeting and Introductions***

The December 17 Technical Management Team meeting was chaired by Cathy Hlebechuk of the Corps and facilitated by Donna Silverberg. The following is a distillation, not a verbatim transcript, of items discussed at the meeting and actions taken. Anyone with questions or comments about these minutes should call Cindy Henriksen at 503/808-3945.

### ***2. Chum Update.***

Ron Boyce provided information from the most recent chum spawning surveys, noting that live chum and chinook counts on the lower river spawning grounds have peaked, and have now begun to decline. Flows have come up due to the heavy precipitation over the weekend, he said, and fewer chum are now being seen. Boyce noted that, overall, field crews have counted about 1,500 live chum on the Ives Island spawning grounds to date in 2003, down from more than 6,000 by this date in 2002. Scott Bettin noted that Boyce is referring only to chum in the Ives Island area; these numbers do not include returns to Hamilton Springs, Multnomah Creek and other areas. Do you have a 2003 chum population estimate for the entire lower river? Bettin

asked. Not yet, Boyce replied. And the plan is to continue to do the spawning ground surveys through the end of December? Bettin asked. Correct, Boyce replied. We should talk about ending the chum operation at today's meeting, said Bettin; the planning date in the BiOp is December 31.

Hlebechuk noted that, on Friday, the Corps sent out a teletype instructing project personnel to raise the Bonneville tailwater elevation to a range of 11.6-11.9 feet; yesterday, with recent rain events pushing Willamette flows past 90 Kcfs and Lower Columbia flows at Bonneville past 250 Kcfs at times, another teletype went out increasing the tailwater range further, to 11.8-12.1 feet. This teletype goes into effect at 11 a.m. this morning, she added. So 11.8 feet will be the minimum tailwater elevation during the incubation period as well? Boyce asked. That's correct, Bettin replied. While there some salmon managers expressed concern about spawning at high elevations when the tailwater range is this high, no strong FPAC objections were raised to this operation. We'll monitor the situation, said Boyce, although with the number of live spawners on the decline, we don't anticipate a major problem.

With respect to incubation flows, said Hlebechuk, if the spawning flow averaged 135 Kcfs, my understanding is that the incubation flow would need to be at least 125 Kcfs. A tailwater elevation of 11.8 feet at Bonneville should provide the level of protection needed during the incubation phase, Paul Wagner replied, but we'll verify that through field surveys.

The Corps does have some concerns about our ability to fill Grand Coulee and other storage projects and to maintain that level of flow for lower river chum, Hlebechuk said – is it fair to say that Grand Coulee refill by April 10 should be a higher operational priority than maintaining flows for chum incubation, if the two come into conflict? she asked. It is for some, Boyce replied. That is generally an accurate statement, added Wagner; every year, however, it is a judgement call. We'll look at the data, said Boyce – there may not be any spawners above the 11.5-foot level which is where the better springs are. How about if we agree to maintain the 11.8-12.1-foot elevation range at least through the TMT's January 7 meeting, Bettin said. We will also assume that the chum spawning protection operation will end on December 31, he added. The 11.8-foot minimum elevation will remain in place, however? Boyce asked. That's correct, Bettin replied.

### ***3. Other Snake River Issues.***

Bettin said the spring spill trigger issue will be discussed at the January TMT meeting. With respect to the zero nighttime flow issue for the Lower Snake projects, said Silverberg, there were a few loose ends to be tied up. As agreed at the last TMT meeting, Hlebechuk reported on the percentage of the available hours the Snake projects have gone to zero flow in the last three years. We ran two separate analyses, she said; the first assumed that 24 hours a day was available to go to zero flow. In 2000/2001, the percentage this operation was implemented was 3%, in 2001/2002, 4.8%, 2002/2003, 12.5%. Under the second assumption, only six hours a day are available for the operation, and the percentages go up proportionally, she said: 2000/2001, 12%, 2001/2002, 19%, 2002/2003, 50% of the available hours during the period December 1-February 28.

Do you have the numbers for this year? Boyce asked. Starting on the evening of December 4, we've implemented zero nighttime flow in nearly 100% of the six available nightly hours, Bettin replied – we've been trying to use it every night, because it's been very helpful,

from an economic standpoint. There have been a few nights when we've only gone to zero flow during five of the available six hours, Scott Boyd said.

At yesterday's FPAC meeting, there were concerns raised about the language of the agreement covering this operation, particularly the concept of "limited use" of this operational strategy, as well as the concept of "few if any" adult steelhead arriving at Lower Granite, said David Wills. There was some wording in the original agreement that it would be helpful to get some clarification on, he said; in our opinion, a meeting between NOAA Fisheries, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the other salmon managers and the action agencies might be a good idea. We think it makes sense to try to update that agreement, Wills said.

It should be noted that we are not implementing that agreement as written, Bettin said -- we're limiting the numbers of hours per day the agreement originally specified.

The primary biological concern, for the salmon managers, is the effects of this operation on the adult steelhead currently migrating upstream? John Wellschlagler asked. Correct, Wills replied -- there are some new numbers available from the video counts at Little Goose, for example, which we're in the process of analyzing. Generally speaking, however, the number of adult steelhead passing the project drops off during nighttime hours, Wills said.

Greg Haller said the Nez Perce Tribe remains concerned about the biological effects of this operation, particularly with respect to delayed adult passage and its effects on fall chinook juveniles rearing in the Lower Snake reservoirs. Haller noted that the last information he has seen said more than 100 adult steelhead per day are still passing Lower Granite; there could be economic impact due to the impacts on the winter steelhead fishery in the Clearwater River. Haller asked for the Corps' interpretation of the "few if any" adult migrants criteria specified in the original agreement. We have not been able to find that agreement, Hlebechuk replied; until it is found, it's difficult to offer an interpretation of the specific language in the agreement.

Does zero flow affect fish health, or just timing? Bettin asked. I don't know the answer to that question, Haller replied -- opinions vary about what the studies actually say on that question. Boyce said that, in his opinion, shutting off flow in the system seems unnatural, even if it's only a few hours of the day. I think we need to make sure we're not causing a detrimental biological impact through this operation, Boyce said.

Are you suggesting that a separate TMT meeting is needed on this issue? Silverberg asked. Let's put it on the agenda for the January 7 TMT meeting, Wills replied. The tribes would prefer that the zero flow operation be stopped until this issue can be resolved, Haller said. Doesn't the 1987 agreement specify that the salmon managers must agree with this operation? Russ Kiefer asked. We cannot find that agreement, Bettin replied; this seems an arbitrary point in time to revisit an operation we've implemented every year since 1987.

We operate per the water control manual, Hlebechuk said. If the salmon managers want to elevate this issue to the IT, they are welcome to do so, Silverberg said -- we can convene an IT meeting tomorrow, if folks feel strongly enough. The IT did discuss this issue at its December meeting, Silverberg said; their recommendation was that TMT work through the available data as soon as possible with the goal of reaching technical agreement on this operation. Basically, the salmon managers are still looking at the data, said Wills; once we've completed that process,

we need to have some further discussion on this issue. In response to a question from Kiefer, Hlebechuk said the relevant section of the water control manual specifies that

Minimum project discharge limits ensure the safe passage of anadromous fish during their migration to the spawning grounds. From December through February, “zero” minimum project discharge is permitted on a limited basis. Under an agreement between the Corps of Engineers and the fishery agencies zero river flow is allowed for water storage during low power demand periods (at night and on weekends) when there are few if any actively migrating anadromous fish present in the Snake River.

Kiefer said that his understanding was that one of the criteria under which this operation can be implemented include salmon manager agreement; you do not have that agreement, he said. Bettin replied that the issue has been worked through the Regional Forum process, and the salmon managers had declined to elevate it for IT decision. Hlebechuk noted that the language in the water control manual does not refer to salmon manager concurrence.

The discussion continued in this vein for some minutes. Ultimately, Wills noted that there is unanimous agreement, among the salmon managers, that the most recent dam counts for adult steelhead, 100+ per day at Lower Granite, exceed the “few if any” criteria. He reiterated the additional salmon managers’ concern that the operation is being implemented all of the time, rather than during a limited amount of the time. We are willing to discuss this issue further, once the salmon managers come to agreement on what the technical information means and what the criteria should be, Bettin said. Haller noted that it should be the Corps’ responsibility both to find the 1987 agreement and to provide additional data, for example, fish counts from the Lower Snake projects. In the meantime, though, we’re concerned that this operation is ongoing, said Kiefer – we feel it should be stopped while this issue is resolved.

Ultimately, Hlebechuk said that, in the Corps’ opinion, the agency is within its legal authority to operate as it currently is doing. Kiefer said he stands corrected; the relevant water control manual language does not refer to salmon manager concurrence with this operation. Turner said he is in the process of checking on the availability of the adult steelhead video count data from the Lower Snake projects – we can at least make the tapes available for fisheries agency review, he said. We will discuss the criteria the salmon managers feel is appropriate, Hlebechuk said, once the salmon managers are ready to do so. And in the meantime? Haller asked. The current operation will continue, Bettin replied. And I can raise this issue to IT any time? Haller asked. Correct, Silverberg replied.

And does BPA intend to exercise this flexibility 100% of the time? Boyce asked. We do intend to implement it 100% of the 25% of the time we are allowed to use the zero flow operation, Bettin replied – we have agreed to limit that operation to no more than six of the 24 hours in the day. In response to another question, Bettin said this operation is worth approximately \$25,000 per day in increased power revenues. He added that this operation only makes economic sense at flows of up to 60 Kcfs in the Snake River.

We will look for an email from Rudd regarding the availability of the video count data, said Silverberg, and will then see where the other TMT members want to go with this issue. Until that is decided, the action agencies will continue with the current operation.

#### ***4. Spring Creek Update.***

Wills reported that the discussions on this issue are moving forward, but there is nothing substantive to report at this time.

## ***5. Water Management Plan.***

Scott Boyd said he has received no additional comments on the fall/winter update to the 2004 WMP; if anyone would like to comment, on the zero flow in the Lower Snake operation or any other issue, they are welcome to do so, he said. We'll look at it and get back to you by January 7, Boyce replied.

## ***6. Operations Update.***

Bettin said SOR 2003-03, regarding burbot operations, is being implemented, and Libby outflow is being ramped down from its current rate of 15 Kcfs to reach 10 Kcfs by midnight this Friday, December 19. The intent is to draft the project to elevation 2411 by December 31. We will try to hold flows as steady as possible through the end of December, Hlebechuk said; however, the December final forecast for Libby is 111% of average, so we will likely have to increase outflow at some point. The current Libby elevation is 2417.6 feet.

Hlebechuk said Albeni Falls is releasing 15 Kcfs, with current elevation in the 2051.5-2050.5 range. Dworshak is at elevation 1517.6 feet, currently, far below its December 31 flood control elevation of 1558 feet, and continues to release minimum project discharge. The current Grand Coulee elevation is 1286 feet; at Hungry Horse, 3527.8, said Tony Norris.

## ***7. Libby End-of December Variable Draft Limit.***

Hlebechuk said the Corps has completed model analysis and the report; if conditions were appropriate, she said, we would have implemented the operations recommended in the study and would have targeted drafting Libby to higher than 2411 by December 31. The forecast would have needed to be 85% of normal or less to implement the variable draft limit, she said.

## ***8. Next TMT Meeting Date.***

The next meeting of the Technical Management Team was set for January 7.

### **TMT PARTICIPANT LIST December 17, 2003**

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